Faith and the university experience in the UK

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In the twenty-first century, research on religion in British higher education is flourishing. Religion has been neglected in studies of contemporary higher education, but over the past decade it has attracted new attention. This attention comes both from academics – scholars of higher education and of religion – and higher education leaders and policymakers. The religiosity (or non-belief) of students and staff is of new interest to university managements as they negotiate provision for all students, religious and none, and as they work to discern how they can be inclusive of religious perspectives.

There are three main drivers for this new focus on faith in higher education. The first is *policy*. Since the 1970s equality legislation has been passed outlawing discrimination on the grounds of gender, race and disability. Inequalities related to religion, sexual orientation or age were not recognised through legislation until the twenty-first century; for instance, the 2006 Racial and Religious Hatred Act and then the 2010 Equality Act which aimed to provide for the full gamut of equality characteristics (called 'protected characteristics' in the Act) including age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity. Policymakers and higher education professionals, including the Equality Challenge Unit (founded in 2001 to support equality and diversity in higher education), HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England, founded in 1992 in the wake of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992) and the National Union of Students (founded in 1922 to improve students' lives), have become aware of the need – indeed the legal requirement - to consider religion as an equality issue within higher education and to work to ensure religious students and staff are treated equally and respectfully.

The second driver is *the research community*. The social scientific study of religion has gained new prominence since the funding of the £12 million Religion & Society research programme led by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. The Religion and Society programme funded 75 projects, with its second phase focusing specifically on Religion and Youth. Religion in higher education had been investigated before this new wave of research: Sophie Gilliat-Ray's pioneering book *Religion and Higher Education*[1] sketched out the contours of 'the multi-faith campus,' pointing to religious diversity

[1] Gilliat-Ray, 2000

as a driver for the 'de-secularisation' of many British campuses. Following her lead, the field gained new momentum. The Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education project led by Adam Dinham at Goldsmiths College London[2], the Religion and the Idea of a Research University project led by David Ford at the University of Cambridge[3] and the Religion and Belief in Higher Education project led by Paul Weller at the University of Derby (to be discussed) are three of the dozen or so significant projects on religion in British higher education.

The third driver is the university sector's increased focus on *the student experience*. The development of the University of London in the nineteenth century and the civic or 'red brick' universities at the turn of the twentieth century ushered in the beginning of an era when university education became available to more than simply the elite. Student numbers increased again from the 1960s, first via the development of new campus universities in the wake of the 1963 Robbins Report, then by the government's 1992 conversion of polytechnics to universities. Under Prime Minister Tony Blair, in 1999 the Labour government set a target of getting 50% of young people into university education by 2010. That target was not met, but nonetheless the numbers of students have risen from 400,000 in the 1960s to over 2,000,000 in the early 2000s.[4] Higher education has become a major player in the UK 'knowledge economy' and universities have to compete for students, spending increasing amounts on promoting their institutions as delivering not only good education, but also a good overall university experience. Accordingly, the concept of 'the student experience' has become prominent in the twenty-first century.

Sabri pinpoints 2009 as the date when articulations of 'the student experience' began proliferating in policy documents.[5] In 2005 the National Student Survey was launched, an annual questionnaire asking final year students about the quality of the teaching, assessment, facilities and personal development opportunities associated with their university degree programme. Analysts – and indeed critics – of the NSS argue that it is symptomatic of the increasing positioning of students not as learners but as consumers. Concurrently with this national survey, individual universities have paid more attention locally to soliciting student feedback, with module questionnaires, course committee meetings with student representatives and annual feedback questionnaires opening up space for 'the student voice'. This focus on the student experience has been positive, especially in empowering students to highlight problems that need remedying. But academics are concerned that in positioning students as consumers, students begin to expect to be entertained rather than intellectual stretched, to see education more as a product than a process, and to measure educational success in relation to the salary they achieve post-graduation

[2] Dinham & Jones, 2012
[3] http://www.ideaofauniversity.com/
[4] Blanden & Machin, 2004
[5] Sabri, 2011

(which surveys such as the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey measures and since 2012 publishes on the Unistats website).[6] The rise in student fees has exacerbated these trends, having been introduced in 1998 (£1,000 per year), raised to £3,000 in 2004 and to amounts up to £9,000 in 2012. With students paying more for their education, albeit indirectly via loans, they expect more 'value for money', even though universities do not, on average, have any more resources to improve their delivery. The 'student experience' discourse, claims Sabri, sanctifies the notion of the student as rational consumer. Moreover, the concept of *the* 'student experience' or *the* 'student voice' unhelpfully, Sabri argues, 'homogenises students and deprives them of agency at the same time as apparently giving them "voice"'.[7] Students are diverse (e.g. by class, ethnicity or gender) and their diversity is masked by the student experience discourse, as are the diversity of their university experiences.

How does this relate to religion? Religious diversity, like gender, ethnic or class diversity, is mostly absent in these homogenising discussions of 'the student experience'. It appears insofar as it becomes a diversity need to be catered for within the requirements on universities to ensure adherence to equality law, but this represents a kind of individualising of religion. If the student is a consumer of learning and of their university experience, religion becomes an individual need to be met. Universities support students in their individual right to express their religious beliefs, and wish to provide appropriate experiences for them as consumers. Hence students should be offered prayer spaces, access to faith advisors and some faith societies to select from, and should be protected from abuse or discrimination against their religious beliefs. But, Sabri argues, this neglects the social and communal context of religion.[8] Therefore, I believe we must ask whether simply providing a few opportunities for religious consumption at university does justice to conceptualisations of faith that students, or religions themselves, might hold.

Faith in UK universities: findings from recent studies

In this context, with policymakers pressing for religious freedom and inclusion at universities and universities keen to deliver a good student experience to those of all faiths and none, the studies deriving from UK researchers enable us to see how universities are responding to these drivers. Exploring several of the key studies on religion and UK higher education reveals several important themes, themes that raise issues for those working at universities and with students.

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[6] Williams, 2013

[7] Sabri, 2011, p. 657

[8] Abstract submitted for a chapter to be written for a book, provisionally entitled *Religion and Belief in Higher Education*, to be edited by Kristin Aune and Jacqueline Stevenson.

Religion and belief in higher education: the Equality Challenge Unit project

Weller, Hooley and Moore's project *Religion and Belief in Higher Education: the experiences of staff and student*s, funded by the Equality Challenge Unit, is important, not only because of its findings, but also because, in being funded by a government-sponsored policy unit, it demonstrated an increasing government concern to monitor how well universities are implementing religious equality legislation.[9] The research team surveyed 3077 staff and 3935 students at UK universities. They found that the majority of students identified as religious (only 31% said they had no religion). As a survey using a snowball sample this is perhaps not surprising (it is likely that voluntary surveys about religion will be more attractive to religious participants), yet, upon examining other data from universities who ask students their religion when they enrol (see below), the figures are quite similar. Of their student participants 44% were Christian, 9% were Muslim, 5% were spiritual, 2% each were Pagan, Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish, 1% were Sikh and 2% ticked 'other'.[10]

Participation and access was a key theme that emerged: many, probably most, universities do not monitor student or staff religion, so it is hard to know whether they are doing enough to ensure equality for religious people. Most students are satisfied with how religion is dealt with in their classes; even though religion is often not discussed, the students did not feel discriminated against. Some religions have dietary requirements – for instance halal or kosher food – and some universities provide for this. Others do not or do not label food sufficiently well for Muslim or Jewish students to feel comfortable eating. For instance, a Muslim student said: 'My university has a halal certificate but does not clearly state what is halal and what is not, so most Muslim students, including myself, do not eat at cafeterias'.[11] But another pointed out that other faiths may object to halal meat: 'Generally, vegetarian food is well catered for; however, the advent of halal food fails to recognise that many communities, including non-vegetarian Hindus and Sikhs, find this type of meat served by default to be morally unacceptable'.[12] Alcohol is a significant issue for religious students in Britain, where it is central to many student activities. Students who do not drink alcohol, or do not drink to excess, report feeling excluded, and this is especially so for international students. As one said: 'My tutor said: come and have a whiskey. When you say you don't drink whisky, they don't quite understand. They don't follow through. I have had to say "am I not invited then?"'[13]

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[9] Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011.
[10] Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 25
[11] Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 42
[12] Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 43
[13] Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 50

Accommodating religious observance was a second theme in Weller, Hooley and Moore's research. Most university academic years are structured around the Christian calendar, making it difficult for students of other faiths to take time out to celebrate their festivals. Universities' understanding of this is variable. One Jewish student said:

> My first day of lectures was on Yom Kippur, which is the Day of Atonement and a most holy day for Jews. The day for moving into the halls was on Rosh Hashanah – Jewish new year. I am not a very religious person apart from the two days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These are the three days when I come out of the woodwork and go to the synagogue and I pray. Last year because it was the first year of university I had to come to university early but my first day of lectures I was caught between a rock and a hard place. Do I go to university or go to synagogue like I have for the last 18 years? It just didn't feel right.[14]

In 2015 and 2016 Ramadan, Muslims' fasting month, falls in the June exam period, making it especially important that universities make provision for this. Will universities provide an alternative exam period for those affected by this? The use of prayer or religious buildings in graduation is also an issue as it can make students of other faiths or none feel uncomfortable.

Religious dress, for instance the face veil for Muslim women or the turban for Sikhs, can occasionally be interpreted by universities as problematic – for instance in relation to photo ID cards or the requirement that medicine or nursing students have their arms uncovered for health and safety. Positively, 86% of students who said they had religious dress requirements said they were able to fulfil them satisfactorily[15], but with some disturbing exceptions: an international Sikh student was accosted for wearing a large kirpan (ceremonial dagger) and the police were called.[16]

Discrimination and harassment was a third research theme. 94% of surveyed students said they had not been discriminated against or harassed because of their perceived or actual religion or belief identity, but there were variations according to religion. Jewish, Sikh and Muslim students were most likely to feel discriminated against or harassed.[17] For instance, a Jewish student reported: 'When discussing the Holocaust as part of a theology module, I felt another student was being insensitive, as she told me I needed to get out of the "Jew-box" when viewing the Holocaust'.[18]

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[14] Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 55
[15] Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 67
[16] Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 69
[17] Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, pp. 76-78
[18] Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 79

Incidents of harassment were discussed by students of all religions and none, and Hooley and Weller conclude that more monitoring of religious identity will enable universities to monitor whether harassment is occurring, so that it can be dealt with. In relation to staff, monitoring religious affiliation will also enable universities to see whether there is a 'religion pay gap' similar to the 'gender pay gap' and whether more needs to be done to ensure staff of particular religion or belief groups are treated (and promoted) equally. Indeed, this research project led the Equality Challenge Unit to recommend to the Higher Education Statistical Agency not only that religious monitoring of staff and students' religious affiliation be done, but that HESA include 'spiritual' as a category within their (as yet optional) religion monitoring question.

The faiths in higher education chaplaincy project

Chaplaincy and faith advice provision is a crucial area of universities religious provision and an important project foregrounding this was *Faiths in Higher Education Chaplaincy*, a report carried out by the Church of England Board of Education.[19] This project investigated the role of chaplaincy, reflecting on how chaplaincy appears to be changing in the twenty-first century. Clines surveyed chaplains in over 100 universities, ran thematic dialogue groups and visited many university chaplaincies. He found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that Anglican chaplains are by a substantial margin the largest group among Chaplains. Just over half of chaplains are volunteers, and Church of England chaplains are the most likely group to hold the full-time paid jobs and to be the main Chaplaincy coordinator in individual universities. The majority of chaplains are part-time and Christian, but there are increasing numbers of Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu and Baha'i faith advisors. The report identifies a need for more Muslim chaplains. Indeed, the training for them provided by the Markfield Institute of Higher Education since 2003 is producing more Muslim chaplains, although how their role will be funded is a prescient issue. Clines also found that although inter-faith activities happen in many universities, they do not attract large numbers of students, raising the question: if chaplaincy is, as the report argues, a vital site for the development of inter-religious understanding, how can students be persuaded of the importance of inter-faith engagement enough to engage in it at their own university?

The Muslim chaplaincy project

New research by a team of researchers at Cardiff and Birmingham universities offers an important pioneering study of Muslim chaplaincy. Gilliat-Ray, Pattison and Ali

[19] Clines, 2007

interviewed 65 chaplains, the majority in prisons and hospitals. Drawing on Clines' work, they estimate that there are around 50 Muslim chaplains in further and higher education in the UK.[20] The eleven higher education chaplains they interviewed contrasted with those working in other areas, in that many of them were born overseas and most were men. These chaplains were pioneering in occupying a role that has not existed until very recently, partly because Islam lacks a role similar to the Christian priest or pastor role (although the task of a chaplain does relate to various roles Muslim leaders perform such as teaching and advising).

Today's Muslim chaplains (who are called different things at different universities) face unique challenges and opportunities. Among their challenges is their volunteer status: most are volunteers offering faith advice alongside another job (for instance as a lecturer or member of support staff) so time and funds are limited. Moreover, there is no formal network for Muslim chaplains (one was started but later discontinued) so they lack the support networks that Christian chaplains can access. Additionally, they may be burdened with expectations by their universities that, under the Preventing Violent Extremism agenda – a government-funded programme over the last decade 'to stop radicalisation, reduce support for terrorism and violent extremism and discourage people from becoming terrorists'[21] – they should be monitoring students for signs of radicalisation. Among their opportunities, Muslim chaplains enjoy the chance of sharing Islam with students and staff, are able to successfully negotiate with university authorities on behalf of Muslim staff and students, for instance for better provision of halal meat or by persuading lecturers to allow their Muslim students to attend Friday prayers. Muslim chaplains work within multi-faith teams; this presents both benefits and challenges, as chaplains need to ensure that all students' needs are taken care of, and this sometimes necessitates complex negotiations. One chaplain reported:

> I said I would not allow any wine or anything in the building. Well, then the Hindus came up, "we will not allow any meat in the building". So, I mean, that sort of compromise we had to reach. I said, "all right". That is the sort of compromise we had to reach in the end. All our meals in the multi-faith centre will be vegetarian so that Muslims, Christians, Hindus, anybody can eat there. And there is no alcohol served' (part-time male higher education chaplain)[22]

The issue of space is an important one for chaplaincy and faith societies, to enable individuals' spiritual needs for prayer, reflection and meditation to be met. A central dilemma relates to the question of whether shared space can be provided that

[20] Gilliat-Ray, Ali & Pattison, 2013, p.16
[21] House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, 2010, p. 5
[22] Gilliat-Ray, Ali & Pattison, 2013, p. 108

suits the needs of all groups or whether it is better to provide diverse spaces that suit different needs.

Multi-faith spaces in universities

A recent research project, 'Multi-Faith Spaces: Symptoms and Agents of Religious and Social Change', focused partly on university chaplaincy.[23] Crompton, Brand, Biddington and Hewson found two models operating in multi-faith chaplaincy: one in which existing religious spaces – mostly chapels – were opened up to students of other and no faith, and a second newer model in which a new kind of multi-faith sacred space was designed, usually an empty white room, that different groups could fit to their needs.[24] The Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, opened in 2004, exemplifies this newer model, as if offers flexible spaces that are occupied by different groups at different times.[25] The University of Huddersfield Faith Centre is an interesting example because it provides some permanently separate spaces for Christians and Muslims: a Christian prayer room, and interconnected brothers' and sisters' prayer rooms with washing facilities for Muslims, a large common room (the 'community room') which can be used by anyone, and a multi-faith prayer room for students of other faiths, which doubles as a quiet room for meditation by students of any faith and none.[26]

The Christianity and the university experience project

The research outlined so far raises some key issues relating to faith and the university experience in Britain: participation, accommodating religious observance, discrimination and harassment, chaplaincy and faith advice, and provision of space for religion on campus. The rest of this article will present findings from the first major study of Christianity in English Universities: the *Christianity and the University Experience in Contemporary England* project.[27] This three-year project was collaborative, involving four researchers at the universities of Durham (Mathew Guest and Sonya Sharma), Chester (Rob Warner) and Derby (me). It was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Economic and Social Research Council's Religion & Society programme youth stream. The project explored how the university experience shapes the identities of undergraduate students who self-

[23] http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/architecture/research/mfs/
[24] Abstract submitted by Andrew Crompton for a chapter to be written for a book, provisionally entitled *Religion and Belief in Higher Education*, to be edited by Kristin Aune and Jacqueline Stevenson. See also Crompton, 2013
[25] http://www.multifaithcentre.org/
[26] http://www.hud.ac.uk/wellbeing-disability-services/faithcentre//
[27] See Guest et al., 2013 for more findings

identify as Christian. Essentially, we were exploring what happens to Christian faith at university. Our aims were:

1. To identify the religious beliefs and social values of Christian undergraduates.
2. To explore the impact of the university experience – educational, social and religious – on those beliefs and values, and vice versa.
3. To identify how organised Christian groups – from chaplaincies to CUs – help students respond to the university experience, and to examine their impact upon cohesion and division within the student body.
4. To address implications of these findings for HEIs, government policy, and religious organisations.

The research employed two methods: a survey and semi-structured interviews. The university sector is diverse, so building on Weller and Gilliat-Ray's work,[28] we divided universities into five types: traditional elite universities (often with a history connected to the church), civic or 'red brick' universities (established in major cities around the turn of the twentieth century), 1960s campus universities (established after the Robbins Report), post-1992 'new' universities (most of which were previously polytechnics) and 'Cathedrals Group' universities (part of the Council of Church Universities and Colleges, founded mostly in nineteenth century as church teaching training colleges, gaining university status around the turn of the twenty-first century). The online survey aimed to capture responses from students at three universities from each of the five types (fifteen in total). Securing access to universities via university administration managers and academic networks led to thirteen universities agreeing to participate. University administrators distributed the survey via email to 3,000 students in each (Cambridge's collegiate structure necessitated a different approach). The survey had two parts: the first asked general questions that could be completed by any student, whatever their religion. Those who identified as Christian when asked 'to what religion or spiritual tradition do you currently belong?' (see below for the response options) filled in the second part. We received 4,341 usable responses, of which 2,248 identified as Christian.

The project's second stage was to conduct interviews in one each of the five university types: Durham (traditional elite), Leeds (civic or red brick), Kent (1960s campus), Derby (post-1992) and Chester (Cathedrals Group) were our case studies. In each university we interviewed fifteen students and five staff and religious professionals (for example, Students Union officers, equality and diversity managers or chaplains).

[28] Weller, 2008 and Gillat-Ray, 2000

A key survey question was 'To which religion or spiritual tradition do you belong?' Given the options indicated below, 51.4% said they were Christian and just over a third had no religion.

	% (weighted)
None	34.0
Buddhism	2.2
Christianity	51.4
Hinduism	2.0
Islam	4.9
Judaism	0.5
Sikhism	0.3
Other	4.7

Table 1: Responses to the question 'to what religion or spiritual tradition do you currently belong? Please choose the one that fits best' among undergraduates studying at universities in England (2010-11)

The proportion of Christian students is somewhat higher than we anticipated and should not be cited as evidence that 51.4% of students in *all* universities are Christian. There is no previous research on students' religious affiliation, and what comparisons can be made derive mostly from the few universities who collect religious affiliation data from students on enrolment. We were provided these data by several universities, and the average Christian figure from that was 43.6%; likewise, Weller and Hooley's snowball sample survey produced a Christian figure of 43.8%. Our 51.4% figure is higher, probably reflecting religiously indifferent students opting out of our research, but not vastly askew of the other data available.

Our research aim was not to discover the percentage of students who were Christian; rather, it was to understand the faith and characteristics of Christian students. This is not to say that we were disinterested in statistics relating to religious decline or growth. In a context where fewer people are calling themselves Christians and where some of the indicators of religious adherence suggest a particular drop off among younger people, we wondered: is Christianity losing significance especially for young people? Moreover, in the context of research that suggests that although the majority of English people tick the Christian box in response to the Census question 'What is your religion?', many of them are only minimally religious,[29] we wanted to see whether this was the case for students. Does faith hold little or no meaning for most students who are, on paper, Christian?

To ascertain this, we asked the Christian students if they identified as spiritual, religious or neither (see table below).

[29] Voas & Day, 2007

Religious (%)	Not religious, but spiritual (%)	Not religious or spiritual (%)	Not sure (%)
40.4%	31.2%	15.4%	13.0%

Table 2: Orientations to religion or spirituality among Christian students (weighted)

If a student was a nominal Christian who did not actively participate, we would expect them to select 'not religious or spiritual'. Yet only 15.4% did. 40.4% said they were religious and 31.2% spiritual and the rest were unsure. The reason for the large numbers identifying as 'spiritual' as well as 'religious' was illuminated during some of the interviews we conducted: some students said they did not like the term 'religious', as they felt it was about tradition and ritual rather than a living faith; for them 'spiritual' connoted active faith and practice better than 'religious'.

Examining students' religious practices sheds further light on the degree to which their Christian identification translated into faith-based actions or commitments. We compared students' church attendance in vacations to attendance in term-time and found that vacation attendance was higher.

Frequency	Church attendance during term-time (%)	Church attendance during vacations (%)
More than once a week	10.9	9.6
Once a week	17.9	25.2
Once a fortnight	3.4	4.8
Once a month	2.7	3.2
Occasionally	14.6	24.6
Never	50.5	32.6

Table 3: Church attendance in term-time and vacations among Christian undergraduates (weighted)

In vacations a third of students report attending at least once a week; a third never attends. In term-time the 'never' figure of 50.5% is substantially higher. Fewer attend weekly but the figure for more than once a week is very slightly higher than for vacations, suggesting intensified church commitment for a minority. The reduction in term-time attendance could be interpreted as evidence of declining religious commitment at university. An alternative interpretation is that since most students

live only at the parental home in vacations, in vacations one or more parents take their children to church, so during term-time when students are free to make their own decisions it is easy for churchgoing to lapse. Furthermore, as I will show below, the qualitative responses of students to the question 'In your view, and in your own words, what does it mean to be a Christian?' demonstrates a low regard for church attendance as a necessary expression of Christian faith; instead, other aspects such as belief or moral behaviour were more strongly emphasised. There were some differences in church attendance figures by university. At Durham and Cambridge church attendance was higher in term time, but at red bricks and 1960s campus universities it was lower. This may be due to the location of churches and student residences (the proximity of many churches to student residences in the city centre of both cities makes it very easy for students to get to church services), but it is probably also the case that churchgoing students are more attracted to certain universities (and Durham and Cambridge have Christian histories and links that are relatively absent from Kent and Leeds). If a substantial minority attend church regularly as one expression of faith, a larger proportion regularly pray. Almost half pray weekly or daily (although figures for 'never' are high too).

Interested in discovering how university attendance affects commitment to Christianity, we asked students 'Since attending university, how has your perspective on religion changed?' This table shows the proportions. 11.9% of Christian students have become less religious, 15.0% more religious and 73.2% have remained about the same. In other words, religious stability, not change, is a feature of most Christian students' university lives. This findings contradicts earlier studies of students and religion (mostly American and from the 1970s and 80s) and the work of secularisation theorists, who argued that secularisation was a feature of modern life, especially of university (see for example the work of Peter Berger in the USA and Steve Bruce in the UK). But recent American studies indicate that this is no longer the case. We find the same. In our study, very slightly more Christian students became *more* religious than less religious.

Statistics only tell part of the story, and that is where qualitative data become important. Our survey included several questions which were not 'tick box' answers, but allowed students to write in their thoughts. We asked 'In your view, and in your own words, what does it mean to be a Christian?' This revealed seven themes, themes that enable us to see the different kinds of Christianity expressed to be these students. The first theme was *Christian belief*, and here students expressed specific doctrinal commitments, often connected to believe in the efficacy of Jesus's death and resurrection for achieving salvation for believers. For instance, for this student being Christian means 'To believe and have faith in Jesus Christ and God our father who we will live with once again' (black African female, 21, Derby). The next three groups of responses all related to Christian practice, but with different emphases:

ethical or moral conduct; churchgoing; Christian rites and mission; and following God, Jesus and/or the Bible. This response was typical of the second theme, *ethical or moral conduct*: 'Live a life helping others and not seeking personal gain by capitulating to avarice and greed' (white male, 26, Kent), as was the simple 'Being a good person' (white female, 22, Kent). The third theme, *churchgoing, Christian rites and mission*, was given to responses which evoked specifically church-based rites, ceremonies or practices, for instance baptism, marriage, confirmation or general churchgoing:

> being baptised in the name of Jesus Christ (black African female, 26+, Canterbury Christ Church)

> To get married in a church (unfortunately that's all) (white female, 26+, Canterbury Christ Church)

> To be part of a religious community (white and Asian male, 19, Cambridge)

Interestingly, like was the case for this Cambridge respondent, where they referred to churchgoing, students more commonly spoke less of attending a church building and more of being part of a Christian community. The fourth theme related to *following God, Jesus &/or the Bible*:

> Following and committing, having a positive Christian presence around others, sharing your faith if people ask, and having morals and belief in the truth in the Bible (white female, 18, Winchester)

> To be committed to Christ and to constantly strive to walk in the light. To persevere (white male, 20, Cambridge)

> It means to follow your religion and do as the Bible says to do. It is about following the 10 commandments, being a good person and not judging others. I also feel being a Christian does not mean that you must preach about your Christianity to everyone and anyone, I feel if someone is interested, it is your job to tell them what you believe but not to forcefully tell people. (white female, 19, Derby)

'Following God, Jesus and the Bible' related to other themes – for instance Christian belief – but the emphasis here was on following Jesus in a way that they hoped would lead others to do so. The students were clear, though, that they should not force their beliefs on anyone.

The fifth theme was *experiential Christian spirituality*. Students whose responses fell within this category saw Christianity as being to do with having a relationship with God, with an embodied, experiential faith. As this female student said:

> To be a Christian is to have a personal relationship with God – to discuss your daily life with him, and to allow him to guide you in the choices you make. It is similar to a relationship between friends, or as a father and child. Each person's relationship with God varies, but all true Christians will share an underlying feeling of love and patience. (white female, 20, Kent)

Relationships with God connoted intimacy and friendship. For this mature student: 'It is a way of life, not just a Sunday thing. I enjoy having a daily cup of tea with Jesus and a chat' (white female, 26+, Kent). God was seen as personal, and this relationship outweighed any requirement to engage in particular church-related practices: for this Winchester student being a Christian meant: 'Having someone to always turn to when you need to in God and that your religious beliefs should not be proven by attending church on a regular basis' (white female, 21, Winchester)

While these students' faith was experiential, it was rooted in Christian doctrines and practices, unlike for the sixth group. These students embraced a *subjective spirituality.* This sixth group expressed spirituality but not in explicitly Christian terms and believed personal choice and private experience was most important. This Winchester male referred to being a Christian as 'to have faith in something you are constantly working to understand, something to base your principles on' (white male, 20). This Kent male put it succinctly, disassociating Christianity from any dogma or doctrine: 'It doesn't matter what you believe in, so long as you believe in it' (white male, 21). This Derby response is similarly noncommittal with relation to the concept of God:

> To have faith in the idea that life is not without meaning, there is universal balance to the world we live in. Act responsibly and take responsibility for your own actions. Whether or not there is a God this is your chance to make a difference for the better. (black African male, 23, Derby)

The seventh and final theme related Christianity to *scepticism, cynicism and uncertainty*. Christianity was discussed in the negative, as something students did not believe or were cynical or negative about. This woman from Cambridge simply responded: 'Oppression' (other white mixed ethnicity female, 19). Another, similarly negative, wrote: 'It means that you have been indoctrinated with a belief that is

irrational, dangerous and has been used throughout history, by powerful men and women, to control the masses and justify evil doings' (white male, 20, Durham). This woman equated Christianity only with a secularised version of Christmas and Easter: 'Honestly, the only things I participate in that are remotely Christian are eating Easter eggs and opening presents on Christmas day, and the Christian aspect of both these events is generally lost' (white female, 20, UCL).

In summary, our study of Christianity and the university experience in England reveals a diverse picture. A significant proportion of students – approaching half – affiliate in some way to Christianity, and the majority of these find Christianity meaningful and something that they believe and/or practice during their student years. A minority of Christian students – exemplified by those for whom Christianity connoted scepticism and cynicism, and by the 15.4% who say they are 'not religious or spiritual' – retain 'Christian' only as a label. For most students, Christianity is a relatively stable identity during university, and university is not, on the whole, either a secularising or radicalising influence (though it is for small numbers). Although 28.8% of students in our survey attended church at least once a week during term-time (more than the general population, although as people tend to over-report their attendance, the true figure may be around half of that)[30] church is more about community and relationships than it is about regular attendance. Only a minority see church-related activities as central to their faith. Larger proportions express forms of Christianity centred on one or more of: Christian belief; following God, Jesus and/or the Bible; ethical and moral conduct; and an experiential faith. Students are especially inclined to see religion as *practice*, yet church is not central to their practice of faith.

Given that Christianity is retaining significance for students who aren't going to church, how is this happening? Perhaps this is what sociologist Grace Davie calls 'vicarious religion', the idea that students are passively benefitting from the religious practices of a few and only turning to faith in times of crisis?[31] This may be partly true, and there was evidence that although students did not avail themselves of all the university's Christian provision (especially Chaplaincies), they were still glad that they existed. But most students appeared to have more active engagement with the Christian faith than this. Our interviews (notwithstanding the problem that the students from the survey who agreed to be interviewed were probably those who were more committed to their faith and more eager to discuss it with interviewers) showed that Christianity is central to many, even most, Christian students' lives. It is important that universities take this seriously.

Conclusion

[30] Hadaway, Marler & Chaves, 1993
[31] Davie, 2007

Reflecting on all the research discussed in this article demonstrates the vitality of faith in the twenty-first century UK university. On the whole, students are not (to quote the 1990s band REM) 'losing their religion'. Universities are increasingly religiously plural spaces, home to students from many places and many religions. Policy shifts have encouraged universities to take faith more seriously, ensure they are respecting students and providing for their needs. In many ways this is great news. But university's approach to faith is often seen primarily as about providing spaces for prayer and worship, and chaplains and faith advisors for students to talk to. Conversations about faith on campus, in classrooms and between students are paid less attention, as are the ways in which people of faith can positively impact their campuses. Faith is seen as a need to be met, rather than something that shapes and transforms the university environment. Perhaps this is the challenge for religious people: how might they seek to intervene in the university environment in a way that shows that faith is not simply about providing a bit of space for a privatised religious experience, but is something that can shape the whole institution?

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